

**UNIVERSITIES
IN A
NEOLIBERAL
WORLD**
**ALEX
CALLINICOS**

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sam Ashman, Michael Bradley, Jane Hardy, Tom Hickey, Judith Orr, Malcolm Povey, Mark Thomas, Alexis Wearmouth and Terry Wrigley for their help in writing this pamphlet. I also greatly benefited from participating in the conference "Universities in a Neoliberal World", held at the University of Manchester in November 2005 (www.socialsciences.man.ac.uk/socialanthropology/events/possiblefutures/unlw.html); I am grateful to the organisers for inviting me.

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Universities in a Neoliberal World – Alex Callinicos

First published November 2006 by Bookmarks Publications, London WC1B 3QE

(publications@bookmarks.uk.com)

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ISBN 1898877467

Designed by Bookmarks Publications

Printed by Pioneer Print Limited, London E18

Preface

As joint general secretary of UCU (the University and College Union) and former general secretary of Natfhe since 1998 I have frequently spoken on the experiences of students or our members in higher education (HE). Alex Callinicos has done us all a service by theorising from our experience and our practice in HE.

We have the obscene spectacle of a cabinet stuffed with former student radicals who never paid fees, and who were eligible for grants, pulling up the ladder for this generation. When Jack Straw was president of the National Union of Students (NUS) and leading us in the fight to increase grants, he railed at a government forcing university students to choose between a book and a meal. Students in the 21st century have to choose between finishing an assignment and doing another shift at the supermarket.

The NUS and lecturer unions held a consistent line against top-up fees, saying that tuition fees would turn certain social groups off university. And the introduction of top-up fees has seen a reverse of this trend to expansion with almost 4 percent fewer applicants this year (2006). We warned that a market in higher education would lead to students choosing the cheapest courses rather than the most suitable. We said access to education should be based on ability to study and not on ability to pay.

That is why UCU stood with the NUS against raising the cap on fees. The NUS stood with us in UCU in our battle for decent pay. But when we look ahead, we need to restate the case against fees altogether. The 19th century was about the expansion of free elementary education. The 20th century was about the expansion of free secondary education and the 21st century should be about the expansion of free further and higher education. Further and higher education should become a human right, not a privilege.

The ministers keep saying the resources for expanding FE and HE (without student fees) aren't there, even though students and lecturers, indeed most of the population, can see that this is patently untrue. It's simply a question of priorities. The government could start by raiding the budgets for war. They could save a fortune by bringing the troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan. We were told before New Labour's second term that Gordon had a war chest to spend on HE. We may have been naïve but neither we nor the minister at the time expected him to fritter it away on an illegal and unwinnable war.

The government, establishment and business leaders are just as ambivalent

about further and higher education now as they were in the 19th century. Then they needed a more educated workforce to handle the new machinery. They didn't want to pay for it. Many maintained that the workers and peasants were too unintelligent to learn to read, right and add up. And quite a few, quite correctly, were worried that if they did it might be very dangerous.

Until the 1960s technical education was all there was for the working-class. Universities were largely to replenish the old professions (medicine, law, politics and the church) and to provide a cadre of people with the sense of superiority to run the British Empire. Traditionally, educational theorists used to distinguish between narrow training and broadening education. Ironically, 21st century capitalism brings them together because a broad education provides the problem-solving workers that the so-called knowledge economy needs – but it does it on the cheap.

It's an irony of history that the first generation of students to suffer from top-up fees are the very school students who walked out over the war on Iraq, who have engaged with social movements such as the European Social Forum, who have turned out at Unite Against Fascism pickets. I remain convinced that just as they have won the argument for withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, they will find new ways of organising resistance. As Alex says, their brothers and sisters in France and Greece have shown the way and his pamphlet provides the context for the debate on how that can be achieved.

It is my hope, at the time of writing, that 120,000 members of the new University and College Union will elect a leadership to enable them to stand with students for free comprehensive post-school education. While making history is not simply a matter of will, it is nevertheless the case that people organised can change things. Pass it on. The idea is subversive. Organise yourselves: together we can change things.

Paul Mackney

Natfhe general secretary 1997 – 2005

UCU joint general secretary June 2005 – June 2006

November 2006

Introduction

BITAIN'S universities have been undergoing a dramatic period of change. The most obvious sign of these transformations is physical expansion. In 2004-5 there were 2,287,540 students in higher education.¹ Some 30 percent of 18 and 19 year olds in England now go to university, compared to only about 7 percent in the early 1960s. University education has ceased to be the privilege of a tiny minority – although it is still much harder for people from a manual working-class background to get to university.²

Some people reject university expansion on elitist grounds, repeating the playwright John Osborne's slogan "More means worse." Thus right wing columnist Peter Hitchens denounces the last Tory prime minister, John Major, for initiating the present university expansion, "another grave attack on the quality of education".³ The New Labour government, by contrast, claims that university expansion is a matter of social justice: "All those who have the potential to benefit from higher education should have the opportunity to do so. This is a fundamental principle which lies at the heart of building a more socially just society, because education is the best and most reliable route out of poverty and disadvantage".⁴

Expanding higher education is undeniably a noble goal. The elitists are quite wrong: so long as suitable resources are provided, there is no reason why the government target of 50 percent of 18 to 30 year olds or indeed more shouldn't have a university education and benefit from the experience. But the reality of higher education is very different from official proclamations about equality of opportunity and social justice.

British universities are in fact being driven by priorities shaped by the needs of big business. They are being reconstructed to provide British and foreign corporations with the academic research and the skilled workers that they need to stay profitable. At the same time they are being transformed from scholarly institutions into profit centres earning foreign exchange for the economy of the United Kingdom.

To this end, expansion takes place on the cheap, as resources per student are slashed, and universities, departments and individual academics are encouraged to compete with each other. The shift away from student grants to loans and tuition fees forces many students to work long hours to support themselves in preparation for a life of wage-labour. No wonder potential students from poorer backgrounds are being discouraged from going to university.

This transformation is far from unique. Universities all over the world are being pressured to make the same kind of changes. And this restructuring of higher education is part of a much broader, indeed literally global, economic and political process known as neoliberalism. Embraced by virtually every government in the world along with the business and media elites since it was pioneered by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, neoliberalism seeks to subject every aspect of social life to the logic of the market, and to make everything into a commodity that can be privately owned and bought and sold for a profit.

According to the radical geographer David Harvey, “the evidence strongly suggests that the neoliberal turn is in some way and to some degree associated with the restoration or reconstruction of the power of economic elites”.⁵ This “restoration of class power” has led to a massive redistribution of wealth and income towards these elites.

The top 1 percent of American households received on average 16.9 percent of total household income between 1917 and 1940. Their share dropped to 8.4 percent in 1973, but, after a generation of neoliberalism, soared to reach 19.6 percent in 2001. Meanwhile, between the mid-1970s and 2002, the bottom 90 percent of households saw their share of total household income fall by 12 percent.⁶ In Britain inequality in incomes rose sharply during the Thatcher government, and has stayed at this historically high level under New Labour.⁷

This shift in wealth and power has involved the large-scale restructuring of different social fields, including higher education. The consequences have been dire. Academics and other university staff are increasingly denied the opportunity to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to meet students’ educational and other needs. They have also seen their pay decline compared to that of other professionals. Students, despite official proclamations that they are the sovereign “consumers” of higher education, are also victims of the universities’ subordination to the priorities of the market.

Fortunately, neoliberalism is facing increasing resistance in higher education. In the spring of 2006 students in France and Greece succeeded, with the help of university teachers and other workers, in defeating pro-market government “reforms”. Britain didn’t see anything so spectacular, but university teachers in Britain mounted a three-month assessment boycott over pay. These struggles have unfolded against the horizon of the global resistance to neoliberalism that started with the protests at Seattle and Genoa.

But much larger social movements will be needed if neoliberalism is to be defeated and replaced by a different logic. This pamphlet offers an analysis that can help these movements by identifying the nature of the enemy and how to fight it. It draws, not just on the facts and figures cited, but on my own experi-

ence of teaching in British universities for over a quarter of a century, and thereby witnessing the changes examined here.

But I don’t attack these changes out of nostalgia for an idealised past. I have no desire to return to the much smaller and more privileged university system of earlier years. Opposing neoliberalism in higher education should be part of the struggle for a society that really does give everyone an equal chance to realise themselves. Accordingly, my theoretical framework is provided by Marx’s analysis of the capitalist economic system. What neoliberalism ultimately represents is a particularly pure form of the logic of capital. Therefore, the struggle for better universities can’t be separated from the movement against global capitalism itself.

Neoliberalism and the “knowledge economy”

THE present transformation of British universities started under the Tory governments of 1979 to 97. Nevertheless, New Labour has embraced the neoliberal restructuring of higher education in a much more whole-hearted way. In part this reflects the broad thrust of Tony Blair’s personal agenda, now endorsed by Gordon Brown – to force through policies of privatisation and commodification in parts of the public sector where even Margaret Thatcher dared not go. But it is also a consequence of the central role that education plays in New Labour ideology and policy.

The key idea here is that of the “knowledge economy”. One of the Blair government’s earliest policy documents was a Department of Trade and Industry White Paper called *Our Competitive Future: Building the Knowledge-Driven Economy* (1998), produced by Peter Mandelson during his brief and inglorious stay at the DTI. Charles Leadbeater, a former Downing Street adviser, argues that one of the main forces ruling the world economy today:

is “knowledge capitalism”: the drive to generate new ideas and turn them into commercial products and services which consumers want. This process of creating, disseminating and exploiting new knowledge is the dynamo behind rising living standards and economic growth. It reaches deep into our lives and implicates all of us as consumers and workers. If we were to turn our backs on the global economy, we would also leave behind the huge creative power of the knowledge economy.⁸

The idea of the knowledge economy has in fact become a bit of a cliché among contemporary political and business elites all over the world. Packed into it are several different claims:

- A shift is taking place from the production of physical goods to that of immaterial services.
- Partly in consequence, production is becoming more “knowledge-intensive” – in other words, products are likely to sell more, thanks to both the increasingly sophisticated techniques used to make them and the ideas that they represent and that are used to market them, all of which relies on research by

highly qualified workers.

- The success of companies and national economies alike is therefore increasingly dependent, not on the physical plant and equipment that they have built up over years, decades, or even longer, but on their “human capital” – that is, on the skills, knowledge and imagination of their workforces. It is through successfully using these skills to supply what the world market wants that individuals, firms and whole countries can prosper.

These ideas were especially fashionable at the time of the so-called “dotcom boom” at the end of the 1990s. Rapid economic growth in the United States and soaring share prices encouraged the euphoric belief that an IT-based “New Economy” had emerged that would power global capitalism into a future of endless prosperity. But, despite the crisis that afflicted the US at the beginning of the present decade, faith in the knowledge economy persists. For example, the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman recently published a widely-praised book called *The World is Flat* in which he argues that the year 2000 marked “a whole new era” of globalisation where “the dynamic force...is the newfound power for individuals to collaborate and compete globally” thanks to “software – all sorts of new applications – in conjunction with the creation of a global fibre-optic network that has made us all next-door neighbours”.⁹

My aim in this pamphlet isn’t primarily to criticise the rosy picture of global capitalism painted by ideologues such as Leadbeater and Friedman: I’ve done this elsewhere.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is worth making a few points about the idea of a knowledge economy. First of all, claims about a shift to services have to be handled with great care. Some of the biggest recent marketing stories have, after all, been those of new physical goods, for example, mobile phones and mp3 players.

Secondly, successful economies tend still to be those that thrive in producing and exporting manufactured goods. Consider this recent report about Germany in the *Financial Times*: “No other industrial nation has so successfully harnessed the opportunities offered by an inter-connected global economy. This mid-sized economy of 80 million, often painted as angst-ridden, risk-averse, and allergic to change, has been the world’s largest exporter of goods every year since it overtook the US in 2003”.¹¹ Germany is a successful exporter thanks to its success in maintaining its position in supplying global production networks, by mainly making complex components, just as China has carved out a role for itself in assembling finished products for these networks.

Export success doesn’t necessarily lead to job security or prosperity, however. Germany suffers from chronic unemployment, currently running at 10 percent of the workforce. More surprisingly, perhaps, according to the Asian

Development Bank (ADB), Asia faces a growing unemployment crisis. The *Financial Times* reports, quoting Ifzal Ali, the ADB's chief economist:

The slow pace of job creation even in countries with relatively high growth rates has left 500 million unemployed or underemployed in a region with a total labour force of 1.7 billion. Another 245 million are set to join the labour market over the next decade...

While the newly industrialised economies of Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore had succeeded in generating many "good jobs", demanding high skills and wages, others, especially in south Asia, had failed. Although the region has made progress in reducing poverty in the past two decades, almost 1.9 billion Asians still survive on less than \$2 a day, either unable to find work or earning too little when they do, the bank said.

The bank said a "huge global oversupply of labour" resulting from the growing integration of China, India and Russia with the world economy had led to a "race to the bottom" as companies pursued competitiveness with "often ideological zeal".

"Asia's success will sooner or later be eclipsed by the pressures of a huge 'reserve army' of unemployed and underemployed workers who are constantly driven to seek out employment at substandard wages in order to survive," Mr Ali warned.

In China it is getting harder to create jobs. In the 1980s, the ADB study calculates, it took a 3 percent growth rate in China to induce a 1 percent increase in employment, compared to the 8 percent growth rate that was required to achieve the same result the following decade.

Employment growth rates have been especially disappointing in the formal sector, where production is more capital-intensive and workers have defined employment contracts that provide for decent working conditions and greater job security.¹²

So even when economies are successful, there isn't any necessary link between competitiveness and profitability – the measures of success – and the well-being of workers and the poor. Neoliberal capitalism does need skilled workers, but it also rests on a vast undergrowth of low-paid workers, many with little or no job security, some illegal migrants, in the rich economies of the North as well as in the global South.

But there are larger uncertainties that the ideologues of the "knowledge economy" ignore. Companies and whole sectors may flourish or fail for reasons that may only at best be partially connected with what they do. Thus the New Economy boom at the end of the 1990s encouraged huge investments in IT and

telecommunications industries, far greater than there was any realistic expectation of making a decent return on. For example, 39 million miles of fibre-optic cable were laid in the US, enough to circle the globe 1,566 times.¹³

This over-investment then, as it has so often in the history of capitalism, led to a bust. Today many IT and telecom firms are still struggling with the effects of this slump while it is often "Old Economy" firms that are currently prospering – particularly those in industries such as oil, gas, steel and mining that have benefited from the rising global demand for raw materials that has been pulling up the prices of these commodities. These firms don't exactly fit easily into the theories of the knowledge economy. But a decade ago the picture was precisely the reverse, helping to give rise to these theories in the first place. This reflects the fact that capitalism is driven by competition, a blind process whose outcomes can be neither controlled nor (in any detail) predicted.

There is another feature of competition that is ignored, not just by proponents of the knowledge economy, but also by vice-chancellors when they proclaim their university to be a "world centre of excellence" or whatever. Competition involves both winners and losers. Not every university can be a "world centre of excellence". What happens to the losers? In the case of economic competition, they are taken over or driven out of business altogether and their workers may lose their jobs. In the case of universities, failure may not mean closure (yet), but it does mean a smaller share of resources and therefore poorer conditions for staff and students.

For even if the ideology of the knowledge economy offers a very partial and rosy picture of reality, it does contain one particle of truth. The present era of global capitalism is one of intense international competition. Individual firms are under constant pressure to cut costs by raising the productivity of their workers. Since there are only 24 hours in the day, higher productivity tends to depend on investment in more advanced technologies. So investment in research and development and in training the highly skilled workers who can design and operate new technologies is necessary.

This same logic of competition is felt by entire economies, which are constantly comparing their productivity and competitiveness with those of their rivals. The spectre of India and China, the great new low-cost economies of the East, are held before bosses and workers alike to keep them searching for efficiency gains. Neoliberalism in higher education means that this logic of competition is internalised deep into how universities work. As we shall see, this serves to ensure that they teach growing numbers of students and perform increasingly vital research as cheaply as possible.

Harnessing knowledge to profits

HYPOCRISY has been a watchword of New Labour in office, but one has to give the government credit about the openness and honesty with which it has expressed its intentions for higher education. Thus an important policy document from Gordon Brown's Treasury declares:

Harnessing innovation in Britain is key to improving the country's future wealth-creation prospects. For the UK economy to succeed in generating growth through productivity and employment in the coming decade, it must invest more strongly than in the past in its knowledge base, and translate this knowledge more effectively into business and public service innovation. The government's ambition, shared with its partners in the private and not-for-profit sectors, is for the UK to be a key knowledge hub in the global economy, with a reputation not only for outstanding scientific and technological discovery, but also as a world leader into turning that knowledge into new products and services.¹⁴

The Treasury makes a strong economic case for investment in research based in the public sector, but emphasises that this research can't be the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Hence the need for "greater responsiveness of the research base to the economy":

Better integration of the research base with the evolving needs of the economy should support growth in business R&D [research and development] and innovation through encouraging multinational firms to invest in the UK supporting middle-sized firms in raising their R&D intensity towards the best in their industry, and fostering the creation of new technology-based sectors through the creation and rapid growth of new enterprises.¹⁵

Since universities are the most important part of the "research base", this means that they have to be subordinated more tightly to "the evolving needs of the economy". This objective was spelled out explicitly in 2003 by the then education secretary, Charles Clarke, who set as one of his three main goals "better progress in harnessing knowledge to wealth creation".¹⁶

As part of this effort, Brown commissioned Richard Lambert, former editor of the *Financial Times* and now Director-General of the Confederation of British Industry, to explore ways of improving the relationship between universities and business. Underlying this mission was Brown's concern to raise British productivity, chronically lower than that of the other advanced capitalist economies.

Lambert highlights the fact that British investment in R&D, a key determinant of productivity performance, has been declining compared to that in other economies: "In 1981, the UK's total spending on R&D was higher than that of any other member of the Group of Seven leading industrial countries, with the exception of Germany. By 1999, it was lagging behind Germany, the US, France and Japan, and only just keeping pace with Canada." Moreover, British R&D investment is concentrated in a handful of sectors, notably pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, defence, and aerospace, and "is lower [than the international average] for all other major sectors and especially so in electronics and electrical, chemicals, engineering, and software and IT services".¹⁷

This pattern reflects more general peculiarities of British capitalism, which has suffered from chronic problems of under-investment in manufacturing industry for more than a century. The areas where R&D is concentrated are among the few where there are still relatively strong British-based industrial companies. But Lambert warns: "All these companies are now global in character, and all have fewer cultural and intellectual ties with the UK than they did a decade ago." They could therefore increasingly shift their R&D away from Britain, since transnational corporations are tending to site their activities close to their key markets.¹⁸

But Lambert points to a much broader change in how R&D is carried on. From the beginning of the 20th century onwards, big companies tended to do research in their own laboratories: this was true, for example, of the German chemical industry and of Bell Laboratories in the US. But this is now changing. Products are now so complex that research is needed into a wider range of technologies than any single company can afford to undertake. Intense competition has forced even the biggest companies to reduce costs by concentrating on "core" activities, cutting back on or even closing their research labs. Finally, it has become easier for individual researchers to move around and even set up their own small companies with finance from venture capitalists.

But R&D remains crucial to improving productivity and competitiveness. Lambert argues that it is the job of universities and the state to pick up the slack left by companies:

In this changing environment, universities are potentially very attractive part-

ners for business. Good university researchers operate in international networks: they know where cutting-edge work in their field is going on around the world. Unlike corporate or publicly owned research facilities, university laboratories are constantly being refreshed by the arrival of clever new researchers in the form of students, postgraduates and teachers.¹⁹

As the American business academic Henry Chesbrough puts it,

The wealth of innovations that diffused out of these [corporate] laboratories since the 1960s is not likely to recur from those labs in the future, given the labs' shift in orientation away from basic research. The seed corn that will create the innovations of 20 years hence will have to be provided elsewhere in the society. Governments and universities will need to address this imbalance. Increasingly, the university system will be the locus of fundamental discoveries. And industry will need to work with universities to transfer these discoveries into innovative products, commercialised through appropriate business models.²⁰

Moreover, Lambert argues, “the change is especially important for the UK, where research output from the universities compares well with the international competition, but business research does not. Properly managed, there could be significant opportunities for UK business to sharpen its competitive edge through these new partnerships”.²¹ According to various international performance indicators, British universities are generally number two or three in the world (with US universities consistently number one), way ahead of British firms' global ranking.²² So the academy is to come to industry's aid.

There is something paradoxical about all this. According to neoliberalism, private enterprise is best. This is the rationale for the large-scale privatisation of the provision of health and education services being forced through by New Labour. But, when it comes to R&D, so crucial to competitiveness, private firms are cheerfully cutting back on the most important, long-term investment, in the expectation that universities and behind them the state will take on this role.

From a Marxist perspective, this isn't quite so surprising. The state depends on the health of the economy over which it presides for the resources it needs in order to conduct its activities. In a capitalist society, this gives those running the state an interest in promoting the profitability and growth of the firms that dominate the economy. Should they fail to do so, then these firms will punish them by, for example, taking their capital out of the country, thereby making it more expensive for the state to borrow money, and forcing down the exchange-

rate of its currency.

Under Blair and Brown New Labour reached the conclusion that, rather than precipitate this kind of capital flight, governments must slavishly follow the whims of big business. As in the past, this can involve the state performing activities that are in the interests of capitalists generally but that they individually find too expensive to undertake. This was one reason why, in the first half of the 20th century, the state took on the job of ensuring that the workforce and its children were kept healthy and well educated – and hence efficient and acquiescent.

Under the Tories and New Labour the state has been restructured – welfare provision hasn't been abolished, but has been cut back and, as far as possible, privatised, the repressive parts of the state – armed forces, police, prisons, security services – have been strengthened, and resources have been transferred to help make private firms more competitive. What is happening in higher education is an example of this. The government wants to increase total UK investment in R&D from 1.86 percent of gross domestic product in 2002 to around 2.5 percent in 2014. To this end spending on public research is due to increase, after inflation, at a rate of 5.8 percent a year between 2004-5 and 2007-8.²³

But this money isn't being given to universities to spend on whatever research they believe to be valuable. On the contrary, as we have already seen, the government's aim is “harnessing knowledge to wealth creation” – to the logic of competition and profit. Leadbeater puts it even more starkly: “Universities should become not just centres of teaching and research but hubs for innovation networks in local economies, helping to spin off companies for universities, for example. Universities should be the open-cast mines of the knowledge economy”.²⁴ This is an interesting metaphor, since strip mines are notoriously bad for the environment and for those who work in them. In fact, this process of degradation is already well advanced in British universities.

There is a historical irony in all this. The student radicals of the 1960s denounced universities as ivory towers of privilege and demanded that what they did became relevant to the larger community.²⁵ Tories and New Labour alike have adopted the language of “relevance”. They too denounce the academic ivory tower, but in the name of very different priorities. The student movements of the 1960s wanted to transform the university and in the process liberate it from capitalism. Today government and business want to transform the university in order to subordinate it systematically to capitalism.

Strip mining universities

THE neoliberal restructuring of higher education in Britain has been going on for more than 20 years. It began under Thatcher as a cost-cutting exercise: spending on universities was held down as part of the Tories' broader attempt to reduce public expenditure. But under Major and Blair the emphasis shifted to expanding universities on the cheap.

This is reflected in the fact that what academic bureaucrats call the “unit of resource” – the amount of money the government allocates per student – has fallen steadily. This means that university workers have become more productive as they have had to teach and provide other services to growing numbers of students. On average, 30 years ago lecturers each taught nine students: now they teach 21 – a 150 percent increase in productivity.²⁶ Particularly in the new universities (former polytechnics and other colleges that became universities in 1992) the burden can be much higher than this average suggests, with first-year students especially being taught in groups of 500 to 600.

At the same time, academic pay has fallen in relative terms. In 1981 to 2001 non-manual average earnings rose by 57.6 percent after inflation. In the same period the salary of academics at the top of the Lecturer B scale in the old universities rose by 6.1 percent above inflation, and that of academics on point 6 of the senior lecturer scale in the new universities by 7.6 percent after inflation. In the decade to April 2003 real average earnings for academic staff rose by 6.6 percent, for accountants by 12.1 percent, secondary school teachers 12.3 percent, medical practitioners 26.6 percent, and managers and senior officials 31.6 percent.²⁷

The productivity squeeze on academic staff has taken other forms as well. One of the most important is the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), first introduced under the Tories in 1986. This takes place at slightly irregular intervals (the last was in 2001; the next finishes in 2008), and seeks to assess the quality of research carried out in every university department and institution in the country.

The rankings of departments and institutions are then used as the basis on which the university funding bodies, the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE) and its counterparts elsewhere in the UK, allocate what is called “quality-related” (QR) money to universities (higher education is full of acronyms and absurd bureaucratic language). This is the biggest source of research funding for universities and is crucial to their ability to function as

more than purely teaching institutions (the other main source in the government system of “dual support” for research is provided by the state-funded Research Councils, which provide grants for specific projects).

The RAE very much reflects the logic of neoliberalism. Academics are employed to engage in research as well as teach (two fifths of their salary is notionally to pay them to do research). How then to measure their productivity? Analogies with industry require that some physical output can be found that can be measured. The obvious “output” of academics is publications. But it soon became obvious that simply counting the number of books and articles wouldn't do, since it's quite easy to write large amounts of rubbish. So the RAE increasingly came to function as a process of peer review, with panels and sub-panels of academics in different subjects assessing the quality of their colleagues' work. Each academic still has to submit four “items of research output”, but these are judged, for example, by whether or not they are published in “highly-rated” journals (which are usually based in the United States).

The RAE has come to be an increasingly costly and time-consuming process that is full of irrationalities. For example, universities have come up with various tricks to keep “unproductive” academics off the books so that they don't reduce their ratings. Thus some lecturers were forced to sign “teaching-only” contracts so they no longer counted for RAE purposes. The exercise in many ways resembles the absurdities of the old bureaucratic command economy in the Soviet Union: since such a big chunk of universities' money depends on their RAE ratings, they have an incentive to massage their submissions, just as Stalinist enterprise managers used to try to deceive the central planners.

In response to complaints about the burden of the RAE (the 2008 exercise is expected to cost £45 million), Gordon Brown announced in March 2006 that the government is planning to simplify the system by eliminating the present element of peer review and allocating QR funding on the basis of “metrics” – ie quantitative targets such as institutions' success in attracting income from the Research Councils.²⁸

This would reinforce the irrationalities present in the existing system; the arts and humanities, which don't receive much Research Council income, would suffer particularly badly. The whole set up is in any case just one example of the way in which an ideology centred on the free market has in fact legitimised a considerable increase in government control of universities. Thus university teaching is also centrally policed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which performs a role similar to Ofsted in schools.

The RAE has already profoundly changed British higher education, in many ways for the worse. Assessment has increasingly been narrowed down to the performance of individual academics. In the 2008 exercise, for example, every-

one's research will be graded according to the following criteria – “Four star: Quality that is world leading... Three star: Quality that is internationally excellent... Two star: Quality that is internationally recognised... One star: Quality that is nationally recognised... Unclassified”: forget it.”²⁹ Because the cost of coming too low in the rankings is very high, institutions will try to push as many staff as possible into the top grades, leading to absurdly inflated claims about their international (why not intergalactic?) standing.

The RAE has been a key mechanism in internalising the logic of competition within universities. Each academic knows that her career prospects depend on how well she does in the RAE. This gives her a powerful incentive to concentrate her time, not on teaching or collaboration with her academic colleagues, but on her own research. Academics try to “buy themselves out” of the heavy burden of teaching and administration by winning research grants. When they are successful, their teaching will be taken on by a temporary replacement or by a postgraduate teaching assistant.

This is simply one of the pressures contributing to the increasingly hierarchical nature of universities. One of the most well-known is the star system. To improve their RAE rankings, universities compete to attract top researchers who genuinely have international reputations. These stars are given special terms – extra high salaries and little or no teaching and administration. The result is a pecking order, with the Premier League of big academic hitters at the top, the mass of underpaid and overworked “ordinary” academics in the middle, and a growing number of temporary staff, many of them research students struggling to finish their PhDs, on short-term contracts or paid by the hour at the bottom.

But there is an increasing hierarchy not among academics but between universities. Lambert pointed out that in 2000-1 15 English universities received between 60 and 68 percent of each of the three main sources of research funding – QR from HEFCE, grants from the Research Councils, and industrial research grants and contracts: ten of them figured in all three groups – Oxford, Cambridge, University College London, Imperial College, King's College London, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, and Southampton.³⁰

Universities that do not receive significant research funding have no alternative but to concentrate on teaching. This division of labour is inevitable in the present system: if a relatively small number of institutions get the lion's share of research funding, the rest (plus part-time staff in the “top” universities) must carry the burden of teaching a vastly expanded student population.

Of course, universities in Britain have always reflected a hierarchy, with Oxbridge at the top. But government policy in general, and the RAE in particular are reinforcing and restructuring this hierarchy. In the 2001 RAE

institutions were ranked from 1 to 5, with 5* at the top. After the exercise was over the government invented a new top ranking of 6* (departments that had scored 5* in this and the previous RAE) and increased in real terms the amount of money they received. 5* departments' allocations were left the same after inflation, and everyone else had their money cut in real terms! The government had, in effect, moved the goalposts. Margaret Hodge, then Minister of State for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education, explained: “We want to concentrate funding on the world class institutions and secondly on those that demonstrate that they are on the upwards escalator”.³¹

A study by the British Philosophical Association brings out just how concentrated this research funding has become. In 2006-7 just £10 million worth of QR was distributed among Philosophy Departments as follows:

5*	£33,634 per research active staff member	(6 departments)
5	£26,579	(16 departments)
4	£8,520	(10 departments)
Below 4	nothing	(12 departments)

The White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* sets out the rationale behind concentrating research funding in this way:

International comparisons show that other countries, like Germany, the Netherlands and the USA (where research and the award of research degrees is confined to 200 out of 1600 “four year” institutions), concentrate their research in relatively few universities. Similarly, the Chinese government is planning to concentrate research funds through the creation of ten world-class universities; and in India there is a National Institute of Technology, on five sites across the country. This suggests we need to look again at how our research is organised, and make sure we have a number of institutions able to compete with the best in the world.³²

As usual, it is the threat of international competition, above all from China and India, that is used to justify restructuring. The logic of this policy of concentrating research funding is to create a university system like that in the US, with an elite of “world-class institutions”, a relatively large number of universities where some research is done but that concentrate on teaching, and, at the bottom, the equivalents of American community colleges that teach primarily vocational courses to poor working class students. This hierarchy of institutions helps to reproduce the class inequalities that are already pervasive in the schooling system.

As a result, teaching very much comes second to research in British universities. At both the institutional and the individual level, success and the rewards associated with it come from research performance. This may seem paradoxical given the now all-pervasive ideology that treats students as customers exercising freedom of choice when applying for courses, but it is an ineluctable consequence of how higher education has been restructured over the past 20 years. The intrusions of the QAA, which are legitimised by this consumerist ideology, provide a further mechanism of government surveillance over universities, but they don't alter the fundamental character of the system.

The low priority given to teaching has been reinforced by the widespread modularisation of university courses. This has had the effect of reducing courses to uniform and interchangeable bite-sized chunks that, ideally, students can pick and mix to compose their own degree. They are the main victims of these changes, which at worst deprive their degrees of any intellectual coherence, especially when they are combined with the replacement of the mediaeval three-term system with American-style 15-week semesters, whose introduction has tended to have the effect of reducing the weeks of actual teaching that students receive.

Another implication of this set up is that the cost of failing to make it as a "research university" is very high. Institutions that fail to gain a decent amount of research funding are likely to experience a further decline in their relative competitiveness. An initial trend or weakness becomes self-fulfilling – falling recruitment, absence of research income, staff demoralisation, and a future as a "teaching-only" institution.

So university managers have a strong incentive to make their institutions as productive and competitive as possible. A few years ago I attended a meeting of senior academics where it was reported that a Downing Street adviser had said that Britain could only support half a dozen "world-class" universities capable of competing with the top American universities. This sort of prediction is calculated to chill the blood of the vice-chancellors of the Russell Group of 19 "research-intensive" universities as each struggles desperately to ensure that their institution is one of those that makes the grade. Anxieties of this kind embed the logic of competition more deeply into higher education.

This logic operates in areas other than research. The high fees paid by overseas students – ie those coming from outside the European Union – give universities a powerful incentive to recruit them. Overseas student fees offer cash-strapped institutions a vital source of income. In 2004-5 there were over 217,000 overseas students at British universities: China (by a wide margin the biggest source), the US, India, Malaysia and Hong Kong supplied the most students.³³

The London School of Economics and the School of Oriental and African Studies are unusual in getting a third of their total income from overseas student fees, but many new universities that don't receive much research funding have been very active in recruiting abroad.³⁴ But British universities are competing for overseas students on a world scale with their counterparts, notably in other English-speaking countries such as the US, Australia and New Zealand.

They are therefore very dependent on forces outside their control – for example, changes in government visa policies (a major issue since 11 September 2001), international economic crises (for example, the one that hit East Asia in the late 1990s), and the development of more robust university systems in major suppliers of overseas students such as China. The more universities tie themselves to the global market for international students, the more vulnerable they are to its fluctuations.

The logic of competition implies centralised management. Getting rid of uncompetitive departments and staff and demanding higher productivity from the rest can't easily be done by democratic debate and decision-making. Power needs to be concentrated in the hands of top managers who are suitably rewarded for enforcing the necessary policies on the workforce. This process is well advanced in British universities.

University tradition in this country is marked by a strong emphasis on collegiality. This may date back to the original medieval idea of the university as a community of scholars, though there is no point in sentimentalising it. The idea of academics collectively running universities is most strongly entrenched in the most privileged institutions, the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, where, at worst, it provided a licence for parochialism, indolence and drunkenness. But in the university system more generally collegiality did mean that academics had a significant degree of control over their work.

The reality is very different now. The neoliberal restructuring of universities has led to a redistribution of power within them. A distinct managerial elite has emerged to implement the new policies. Some are senior academics; others are recruited from elsewhere in the public sector or from private business. Their PowerPoint presentations are larded with business school gobbledegook, but they can't be dismissed as a joke, since they are the ones who make the decisions, which they do not on the basis of intellectual values, but of the bottom line. This pattern is reproduced lower down the hierarchy, as heads of academic departments become line managers required to implement targets laid down by top management, HEFCE, QAA, and the Department for Education and Skills.

This process reflects a government policy of modelling universities on how businesses are run. The Lambert Review paid special attention to university management: "Many universities are reorganising their structures and delegat-

ing authority out of committees and into the hands of academic and administrative managers. The results are more rapid decision-making and more dynamic management. Other universities should follow this lead and borrow from best practice in the sector.” Lambert stresses the role of the vice-chancellor in particular:

The vision and management skills of the vice-chancellor, more than any other individual, determine the future shape and success of a university. The role of the vice-chancellor is now more akin to that of a chief executive officer in an operation turning over hundreds of millions of pounds each year. The challenge of developing and implementing sustainable long-term strategies and financial plans requires considerable managerial and strategic – as well as academic – leadership.³⁵

This is, of course, a version of the ideology of “leadership” constantly invoked by Tony Blair and used more broadly to make heroes of billionaires such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffet. The airs and graces that vice-chancellors give themselves – and the generous salaries they are paid – therefore aren’t primarily a matter of individual vanity and greed. They reflect the broader neoliberal logic: if the vice-chancellor is now a CEO running his university like a business, then he should be treated like one, and paid like one.

That’s how the university employers and the vice-chancellors themselves explained the fact, revealed during the 2006 pay dispute, that the average salary of a university boss had risen to £158,000 a year, 25 percent more than three years previously – 33 vice-chancellors were paid more than the prime minister, with 18 receiving over £200,000 a year. “Vice-chancellors do a demanding job as chief executives of complex, multimillion pound organisations,” said the Universities and Colleges Employers Association and Universities UK. “Their remuneration packages reflect what it takes to attract, retain and reward individuals of sufficient calibre, experience and talent in a growing sector”.³⁶ Exactly the same argument is used to justify the positively obscene increase in executive salaries that has, for example, seen the pay of a top CEO in the US rise from 47 times the average salary in 1971 to 2,381 times in 1999 – a rise way in excess of the growth of profits or share prices over the same period.³⁷

But universities aren’t just being run like businesses – they are being pushed to work more closely with them. As we have seen, the Lambert Review, backed by the New Labour government, puts major emphasis on what it calls “knowledge transfer” – universities conducting research that is of direct benefit to and is used by business. Partnerships between universities and private firms are being strongly promoted. These can take different forms – universities receiving

research contracts from companies, providing consultancies for them, forming longer term collaborative projects, or creating their own “spin-outs”, companies set up commercially to exploit discoveries made in a university.

To support these activities the government has introduced what it calls “third stream funding”, financed from the Higher Education Innovation Fund. HEFCE has announced, “We are seeking to explore the potential of some HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] to play a greater role in fostering productivity and economic growth through making third stream activity their second mission focus, after teaching”.³⁸ What this semi-literate statement means is that some universities are being pushed to working for business or setting up businesses instead of conducting their own research.

HEFCE now produces regular Business Reports. The latest, published in July 2006, revealed, according to the *Financial Times*, that:

British universities were becoming more business savvy.

The number of options and licence agreements jumped 198 percent to 2,256 to 2003-4. The combination of licensing deals, contract research, consultancy income and other activities contributed about £2 billion to the economy in 2003-4.

Universities have become more successful at licensing their discoveries. Adrian Day, the policy officer at HEFCE, said, “Five years ago technology commercialisation was a new word for universities and everyone was being told to spin out companies without really knowing what to do with them. Now we are seeing fewer companies but of higher quality”.³⁹

Some spin-outs are becoming seriously profitable businesses. Also in July 2006 Imperial Innovations, set up by Imperial College, became the first university-owned technology-transfer company to be floated on the market, raising £25 million by selling a 14 percent stake to financial institutions.⁴⁰ A specialist “in turning high-technology ideas into profitable companies” told the *Financial Times* that “most of Britain’s top research universities will have signed long-term deals giving companies exclusive access to their discoveries and inventions within the next two years”. Ten institutions had already made this agreement and “intellectual property commercialisation companies had now started scrambling to sign up the remaining 30 high-calibre universities before anyone else”.⁴¹

Proletarianisation and precarity

THE neoliberal restructuring of universities has dramatically changed the situation of both staff and students. These changes can be summed up in two words – “proletarianisation” and “precarity”. These words may seem intimidating, but then so are the social and economic realities to which they refer. Proletarianisation is the process of being reduced to a wage labourer, dependent on her ability to sell her labour power on the market and subject to managerial power at work. Precarity is the condition of insecurity experienced by increasing numbers of workers and would-be workers in the neoliberal era – of being permanently on the edge of unemployment, having to make do with casual, temporary, perhaps part-time work, or combining several jobs.

Traditionally academics have been a relatively privileged group of employees. They had the status and relatively high pay of professionals. They also enjoyed a large degree of autonomy at work, being able to manage their time and decide when to do their teaching to a degree unusual for wage earners. This sense of being special was reinforced by the role academic staff often played in running universities. These conditions provided the material basis for the idea of the university as a community all of whose members had the same interests. They were reflected in the old universities in the way in which the Association of University Teachers (AUT) traditionally saw itself, not as a trade union, but as a professional association.

This privileged situation reflected the role that universities came to play from the late 19th century onwards when they developed into modern institutions that still taught only a small minority of mainly male young people. Oxbridge took on the function of integrating the old aristocracy with the upper middle class of professionals needed to run a world empire, and other universities emerged to train the researchers and specialists required for a modern industrial capitalist economy, as well as the workforce of the expanding education system itself.

The elite character of this system, which even survived Lord Robbins’s 1963 report recommending the expansion of higher education, ensured that, as the sociologist A H Halsey puts it, “the university had a right to autonomy, to govern itself, and to receive funding from the society it adorned, through state mechanisms unencumbered by democratic parliamentary scrutiny.” The

University Grants Committee (UGC), responsible for government funding of universities between 1919 and 1989, “acted as a bridge and buffer between the universities and the state, carrying this academic interest [in teaching and research] and protecting it against government control”.⁴²

Halsey paints an only slightly caricatured picture of the worldview of traditional academics as it used to be expressed by the AUT: “Gentlemen are not subjected to wages, hours and conditions of work. They have no employer, no trade union, and no machinery of negotiation, arbitration and conciliation. They receive remuneration, not a rate of pay. They follow a vocation rather than hold a job”.⁴³

The experience of the past 25 years has rudely shattered this outlook. Academics have seen their pay more or less stagnate in real terms, and decline relatively. In 1928-9 the average academic salary was 3.7 times average earnings in manufacturing industry, in 1966-7 2.1 times, in 1988-9 1.54 times.⁴⁴ As we have seen, the burden of work has mushroomed as they have had to teach more students and take on greatly increased administrative tasks, many of them imposed by the highly centralised way in which the government and its agencies now run the universities. Unlike the UGC, which it replaced, HEFCE is a simple instrument of state policy. Under its guidance, research has become a rat race with the constant pressure to publish for the RAE. The development of managerial methods of organisation has transferred power from the committees on which academics sit to much smaller groups centred on the vice-chancellors.

Of course, conditions vary throughout the sector. They are generally better in the elite of “research universities” (the Russell Group plus a handful of others), and the star professors recruited for RAE purposes get a good deal wherever they are based. Moreover, within university departments the line of demarcation between managers and routine employees is still more blurred than it is in many other workplaces: heads of departments are “colleagues” as well as “line managers”. This can cause much confusion since, for example, it means that some managers are union members as well.

On the other hand, academic staff in the new universities enjoyed in the past less privileged conditions than their counterparts in the old ones; the struggle, for example, to carve out time for research is nothing new for them. This helps to explain why their union, the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (Natfhe), developed a much more militant tradition of trade unionism, and has tended to be led from the left.

Under its last general secretary, Paul Mackney, Natfhe took a particularly strong political position, especially in supporting the Stop the War Coalition and Unite Against Fascism. These traditions were reinforced by the fact that the union also organised lecturers in colleges of further education, a sector that

experienced in the 1990s a much sharper and more brutal neoliberal reorganisation, and consequently more severe deterioration in conditions for staff and students than universities have yet suffered.

Despite these variations the general trend is very clear – what Halsey calls “the gradual proletarianisation of academic professions”.⁴⁵ University teachers are being reduced to the condition of highly qualified wage labourers. This process is reflected in a transformation in consciousness that is particularly visible among more senior academics in the old universities who started their careers in the 1970s and 1980s when the conception of the university as a community still had some hold on reality.⁴⁶ Much more widespread now is a “them and us” consciousness often expressed in real bitterness towards the government and the university management. Accompanying this change in mentalities is the rise of genuine trade unionism in the old universities – the majorities for industrial action in recent ballots held by the AUT and its merger with Natfhe to form, on 1 June 2006, the new University and College Union (UCU).

But the process of proletarianisation extends deeper than the deterioration in the condition of lecturers. Universities are increasingly reliant on large numbers of staff on short-term contracts. Some are employed as researchers and lab staff; others are taking up a growing share of the teaching burden. There is a strong trend towards replicating the pattern of top American universities, where a course given by a well-known academic involves him or her giving the lectures and the actual teaching in seminars or tutorials being done by postgraduate teaching assistants or other hourly-paid lecturers.

Funding for students to pursue doctoral research is extremely limited. This means that those studying for a PhD have to find ways of supporting themselves. One obvious route is to teach, usually for the university where they are doing their PhD. Sometimes they have to do this teaching as a condition of receiving a university research scholarship, sometimes they are paid on an hourly basis, and sometimes they are employed full time, as a temporary “teaching fellow” or the like.

Postgraduate teachers are only the tip of a much larger iceberg. Colin Bryson estimates that they make up only 15,000 out of a total 70,000 hourly paid lecturers, “something around or just less than the number of salaried full-time and fractional part-time staff who teach in UK higher education”.⁴⁷ Hourly-paid lecturers and other contract staff are the precarious workers of the neoliberal university. Their numbers have grown considerably in recent decades since they offer a low-cost way of teaching increasing numbers of students. But the price is high for all concerned.

According to research conducted or summarised by Bryson, hourly-paid lecturers generally aren’t paid for the time they put in preparing teaching, receive

little training or support, are marginalised in the design of the courses they teach and indeed in the rest of departmental decision making, and therefore find it hard to develop much of a commitment to the institution that takes such advantage of them. Research staff, though they enjoy greater work satisfaction, suffer from job insecurity. Increasingly scientific workers, instead of enjoying secure, well-paid jobs in large industrial labs, work precariously in the universities.

The pervasive gender inequality in higher education is reflected in the concentration of women among hourly-paid and research staff, while their numbers fall in the upper echelons of the academic hierarchy.⁴⁸ In 2004-5 women made up 40 percent of all academic staff, but only 15 percent of professors and heads of department and 29 percent of senior lecturers and researchers. 62.7 percent of female academics worked full time compared to 76.7 percent of their male colleagues.⁴⁹

The social character of students has also changed tremendously in the course of the 20th century. A hundred years ago universities were bastions of the largely male offspring of the aristocracy and the upper middle class. There were only 25,000 university students in 1900, 61,000 in 1924, and 69,000 in 1939. Notoriously Oxford undergraduates scabbed on the General Strike of May 1926. This began to change after the Second World War, with two great pulses of university expansion in the 1960s and over the past 20 years. The proportion of British 18 year olds in higher education rose from less than 3 percent before the First World War to 7.2 percent in 1962-3 and 14.2 percent in 1972-3 and 16.9 percent in 1988-9.⁵⁰

Yet, despite the huge growth in student numbers, numerous studies have shown that people from manual working class backgrounds still find it very hard to make it to university. A major study by Nuffield College, Oxford, of social mobility in Britain after the Second World War, based on interviews with men born between 1913 and 1952, found that at every level the education system was dominated by what it called the “service class” of professional, managerial, and administrative employees:

School inequalities of opportunity have been remarkably stable in the forty years which our study covers. Throughout the service class has had roughly three times the chance of the (manual) working class of getting some kind of selective secondary schooling... An extra 2 percent of working class children found their way into the universities compared with an extra 19 percent of the service class.⁵¹

The categories used by the Nuffield Social Mobility Group (and many other

official studies) are in some ways misleading, since they are based on income and occupation. In Marxist theory a person's class position depends on her place in the relations of production and in particular the process of exploitation – the extraction of surplus labour from the direct producers. From this perspective, the working class consists of all those whose conditions of existence compel them to sell their labour power on terms that lead to their exploitation, which means that they work not just to support themselves but to produce profits for capital. This requires their subordination to managerial power at work, irrespective of whether they do manual or white-collar work and of how skilled they are.⁵²

Today many workers need to have a university education because of the kind of skilled labour needed by capital. Above the mass of white-collar workers and skilled manual workers is a relatively small hierarchy of managers who receive autonomy and material privileges in exchange for supervising the rest of the workforce and therefore merge into the capitalist class itself. Below them are relatively unskilled and low-paid manual workers, often in precarious jobs. It is this latter group whose children find it hardest to get to university.

A major HEFCE study published in January 2005 has shown that about 30 percent of 18 and 19 year olds participate in higher education in England and about 38 percent in Scotland. The biggest recent increase took place under the Tories, not New Labour. “Young participation” doubled between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, but rose by only 2 percent between 1994 and 2000. Moreover, “there are broad and deep divisions in the chances of going to HE [higher education] according to where you live. Young people living in the most advantaged 20 percent of areas are five or six times more likely to enter higher education than those living in the least advantaged 20 percent of areas.” Thus, comparing parliamentary constituencies, the study found:

Young people in the four lowest participating constituencies – Sheffield Brightside, Nottingham North, Leeds Central and Bristol South – have a one in ten, or worse, chance of entering HE. In contrast, in the highest participating constituencies – Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster, Sheffield Hallam and Eastwood (Scotland) – two out of three young people enter HE.⁵³

You don't have to be an expert in social geography to know that that the two groups of constituencies cover respectively some of the richest and the poorest areas in Britain. More detailed analysis at the level of census wards revealed:

a consistent picture – of the areas with the lowest young participation rates being disadvantaged in many other ways, and conversely the areas with the

highest participation rates enjoying many other advantages.

Children in low participation areas are likely to be living in local authority rented homes in some of England's most deprived wards with, for example, less space and fewer household goods than their peers in high participation areas. The neighbourhood maps of participation show that often their nearest secondary school will have only a small proportion of its pupils gaining five GCSE A-C grades. In contrast, children in high participation areas are frequently near schools, often fee-paying, where nearly all the pupils gain these grades. Adults in low participation areas are likely to work in a manual occupation, have a low income, to receive means-tested benefits and not have, for example, a car or an overseas holiday. They are much less likely to have any experience of higher education than those in high participation areas, and the two groups differ sharply across a wide range of measures of political, cultural and consumption behaviour.⁵⁴

Michael Corver, the author of the HEFCE study, said that, “if all areas of the UK sent the same proportion of young people to university as the top 20 percent of neighbourhoods do now, there would be a million more students entering higher education”.⁵⁵ His research confirms what is known more generally about inequality. Advantage and disadvantage are cumulative: in other words, what keeps the rich rich and the poor poor isn't just one single factor but a whole pattern that favours some and undermines others, embracing the physical and mental health of a child's mother during pregnancy, diet, living space, exercise, individual attention during the first years of life, access to books and travel, quality of schooling and parental support. Underlying this pattern is, of course, the distribution of wealth and income.⁵⁶

A child's performance at school – critical, of course, to whether or not she can get into university – is in many ways a proxy for where she fits into this overall pattern of advantage and disadvantage. Research for the Treasury has shown that:

- If one father's earnings are double the level of another, his son's maths test score is on average five percentile points higher than the other's and 2.7 percentile points higher up the reading test distribution.
- For a daughter the gain is five percentile points up the distribution of both maths and reading tests scores.⁵⁷

The New Labour government is well aware of the inequalities in access to higher education. The evidence I have been citing comes from its own studies. Moreover, education generally has been central to the strategy that Brown has

pursued of seeking to reduce inequality by improving individuals' ability to participate more effectively in the labour market. "Fair access" is one of the main slogans of government higher education policy, with the aim of increasingly the proportion of those aged 18 to 30 who go to university from the current level of around 43 percent to 50 percent by 2010.

The authors of one study argue that "there is no prospect whatever" of meeting this target: falling birth rates mean that the number of young people of university age will drop sharply after 2010-11. Moreover, the decline in birth rates is especially high in poorer social groups that participate less in higher education, and so participation by young people from these groups will actually fall.⁵⁸

Whether or not this analysis is correct, New Labour policies work against its own aim of widening access to universities. There are two main reasons for this. The first is that Blair's and Brown's overriding commitment to neoliberalism has helped to perpetuate a profound division between rich and poor. As the *Financial Times* points out, despite Brown's efforts to redistribute income to poor households with children, "by almost every measure, inequality is either the same or more pronounced after nine years of Labour than it was at the end of Margaret Thatcher's tenure...says Mike Brewer at the IFS [Institute of Fiscal Studies], Mr Brown has had to spend more on redistribution 'to achieve nothing'."⁵⁹ Thus, under New Labour the pattern of cumulative advantage and disadvantage that is reflected in inequalities in access to higher education has been further entrenched.

Secondly, one of the main ways in which the Blair government has sought university expansion on the cheap is by abolishing the maintenance grant, introducing and now extending student fees, and thus compelling students to finance themselves by going into increasing debt. Even before top-up fees (generally set by universities at the maximum level of £3,000 a year) came into effect in autumn 2006, there was growing evidence that the prospect was discouraging young people from poorer working class backgrounds from going to university.

The proportion of university entrants aged 18 and 19 from state schools and colleges rose slightly between 1999 and 2003-4, from 85 to 86.8 percent, but fell to 86.7 percent in 2004-5. The proportion coming from poorer backgrounds also dropped back, from 28.6 percent in 2003-4 to 28.2 percent the following year.⁶⁰ Statistically these variations aren't significant, but there have been other signs suggesting that student debt and fees may be having a negative impact.

Applications to English universities were 5 percent down in December 2005 compared to a year previously.⁶¹ A poll of 7,000 year 12 students at state schools who were predicted to get three B grades or better in A Levels found

that 27 percent were less likely to go to university because of the introduction of higher fees.⁶² Meanwhile, applicants from the top three occupational groups make up 73 percent of those awarded places at the Russell Group universities.⁶³

Nevertheless, for all the inequalities in access to higher education, the student population has become much larger and more diverse. There are a million new university entrants every year, more than one in four of whom come from poorer backgrounds. This means that the experience of being a student has changed substantially. For one thing, they matter more economically as consumers and future workers. The decline of manufacturing industry and the expansion of student numbers have made universities a much more important factor in the economy of many British cities.

According to the *Financial Times*, a study commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister:

found the main metropolitan centres had managed to reverse population decline and were emulating the success of London, largely because an increase in university education was improving the calibre of the workforce and changing the profile of the inhabitants.

Manchester in particular was found to have transformed its fortunes as an influx of students coming to the city's four universities stayed on as graduates.

They then provided a market for housing regeneration and fuelled the growth of the local knowledge-based economy.⁶⁴

The economic impact that consumption by large concentrations of students can have is very evident in areas such as Oxford Road in Manchester or Clifton in Bristol. But this should not conjure up images of affluent student binge-drinkers. All the evidence is of growing inequalities produced by a system of student finance based on fees and loans. A government-commissioned study by South Bank University and the Policy Studies Institute published in November 2003 found, according to the *Guardian*, that:

poor students leave university with average debts of over £10,000, despite taking on more paid work and spending less than better off counterparts. Student debt overall has more than doubled between 1998-99 and 2002-03 from £3,465 to an average of £8,666 for final-year students. More than half of undergraduates in 2003 expected to leave with debts of £9,673 or more... Mandy Telford, president of the National Union of Students, accused the government of "spinning figures to paint students as purveyors of some sort of extravagant lifestyle". She said: "What this survey shows is that 43 percent of students have poverty incomes. This is twice as many compared with similar

households in the population at large.”

The report concludes: “Students from lower income backgrounds were more likely to be in debt, and anticipated leaving university with the largest debts.” Students from better off homes avoided high debts thanks to savings and “generous financial support” from their families.⁶⁵

Another study, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, predicts that top-up fees may triple student debt. According to the *Guardian*:

The research...also suggests that disabled students, and students who do not receive help from their families, will be hit most severely... It found that tuition fees have been passed directly into debt: with the average figure rising in line with the increase in tuition fees.

In addition, the fees have not led to a general increase in term-time working. There has, however, been an increase among those who receive no financial assistance from their parents, further disadvantaging these students.

At the same time, the research does suggest that fees have evened up the playing field for some. Students whose parents went to university used to be much less likely to work in term-time, but since fees were introduced, they are just as likely to work during study as other students.⁶⁶

A recent joint study by the TUC and NUS found that between 1996 and 2006 the number of full-time students who supported themselves through paid employment rose from 408,880 to 680,718, an increase of 54 percent. One in ten of these worked full time. According to the study:

Student employment is concentrated in retail and hospitality, two of the lowest paying sectors of the economy...

- Among full-time students, the retail sector accounts for 40 percent of employment, with nearly half a million working in that sector.
- Nearly a quarter of a million full-time students work in the hotels and restaurant sector, equivalent to 21 percent of the working student population.
- For all men working part-time, the average hourly rate of pay is £6.21 an hour in retail and £5.70 an hour in hotels and restaurants. For all part-time women the rates are even lower at £5.98 and £5.51 respectively.
- Student employment in hospitality increased by just over a third between 1996 and 2006, with a clear gender split: the number of male full-time students working in this sector has grown by 22.9 percent since Spring 1996.

The number of female students has grown by 45.8 percent, double the increase among male students.⁶⁷

Some find themselves doing more degrading and dangerous work, if the stories about some women students financing their studies by lap-dancing are to be believed. More generally, however, students merge into the much larger population of precarious workers doing part-time, low-paid, casual jobs. This workforce, many of them recruited from among migrants, is as essential to the functioning of neoliberal capitalism as are the highly-paid and skilled jobs highlighted by ideologues of the knowledge economy.

Ever since the 1960s expansion students have been a transitional group, caught between the social class in which they originated and their future destination in the occupational structure. Uncertainty about where they will end up has helped to make them a politically volatile group.⁶⁸ This structural insecurity remains today. There are undoubted economic advantages that derive from going to university: graduates and those with “sub-degree” qualifications earn on average 50 percent more than non-graduates.⁶⁹

But this “graduate premium” does not place most graduates in a particularly privileged position. Only a handful will end up in really lucrative positions – for example, top-paying jobs in the City. Most will become relatively well-paid and skilled white-collar workers. There, whether they are employed in the public or private sector, they will be subject to the same kinds of pressures towards greater productivity and competitiveness that we have seen at work in universities. The plight of academics themselves, most of whom these days have one or two postgraduate degrees, shows very clearly that university qualifications no longer secure a place in the elite.

This overall pattern isn’t, however, radically different from the one obtaining a generation ago: since the 1960s university has been a preparation for white-collar work. One thing university expansion of a neoliberal basis has done, however, is to force increasingly large numbers of students to become casual wage labourers while they are studying. The precarity they experience then is a good preparation for the neoliberal world of work that awaits them when they graduate.

Resistance is not futile

THE neoliberal transformation of universities over the past 25 years has been relentless, but it has also been piecemeal. Change has come not abruptly, but through a process of drip, drip, drip. At each stage the reaction of many academics has been not to oppose the latest unwelcome change but to make it work in as little harmful a way as possible. This has led to their collaborating in a process whose cumulative effect has been to transform higher education radically and, to a large extent, for the worse.

The effect has been deeply demoralising for many academics, who have helped implement changes that they really hate. Underlying their participation has been the assumption that, in the famous words of Mrs Thatcher, There is No Alternative. Resisting neoliberal “reform” is therefore futile. Acceptance of this assumption leads at worst to joining the other side, and becoming one of the suits who currently run British universities, at worst to the pursuit of individual solutions – promotion or early retirement.

But there is an alternative – resistance isn’t futile. This has become evident since movements of resistance to neoliberal globalisation began to emerge – in Chiapas, Mexico, in January 1994, and then on a much larger scale at with the protests in Seattle in November 1999 and in Genoa in July 2001. The World Social Forum, the most general gathering of these movements, has popularised the slogan “Another World is Possible” – in other words, we don’t have to submit to the logic of neoliberal capitalism. The first European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002 broadened the focus of the movement to include imperialism and war by calling the unprecedented global day of protest against the forthcoming attack on Iraq on 15 February 2003.

Alternatives to neoliberalism have become visible particularly thanks to the way in which struggles in Latin America have developed. In Venezuela, President Hugo Chávez has based himself on the support of the poor, using the country’s oil revenues to implement genuine social reforms and defying the hegemony of the United States. In Bolivia Evo Morales was brought to the presidency thanks to two mass rebellions of the poor, in October 2003 and May-June 2005, that removed his neoliberal predecessors, and sought to restore state control over the oil and gas industry, which had been sold off to foreign multinationals.

Closer to home in more than one sense, in March and April 2006 a spectacular protest movement among French high school and university students

succeeded, with the support of the trade unions, in defeating the draft CPE law, which would have allowed employers to sack workers aged under 26 without explanation during the first two years of their contract. This revolt against the right wing government’s attempt to impose much greater precarity on young workers was marked by a much closer relationship between students and workers than during the great student-worker revolt of May-June 1968. “This time the school and university youth has acted as part of the world of labour”, writes Stathis Kouvelakis.⁷⁰

According to Kouvelakis, this change reflected the breakdown of the traditional separation of function between schools and universities, where the workforce is reproduced by being educated, and workplaces, where commodities are produced:

This separation tends in fact to become blurred under the impact of the dual basic tendency borne by the neoliberal restructuring of capitalism: on the one hand, the growing subordination of the schools and universities to the capitalist-commodity logic that transforms those parts which are most massified and least “competitive” into training centres that are more and more governed by the same logic as that of the positions (scarcely enviable) in the labour market for which they are the providers; on the other hand, the reduction of the gap between youth in schools and universities and young workers due to the increase in wage-earning activity among *lycée* [high school] and above all university students.

Certain branches or sectors of activity (fast food, call centres, department stores, supermarket chains) even specialise in this category of labour. If we add to this the extraordinary proportion of short-term contracts, sham probations, periods of unemployment etc that in France are imposed particularly on those between 18 and 26, we end up with a range of positions which embody a violent movement of reproletarianisation of this part of the labour force.

Such a shift thrusts into the distant past the old gap between a minority of young people from well-off families with access to the *baccalauréat* [high-school diploma] and to university, and a majority who are involved in production.

This “great transformation” has, of course (in comparison with 1968) not only made easier the link with workers but, above all, has given this an “organic” character, the character of the *building of a common struggle*, and not of an alliance or solidarity between separate movements.

It also explains the main form taken by the student movement itself, which brings it closer, including in this perspective, to working class struggle: the “blockade” (and not “occupation”, an interesting semantic distinction despite

aspects that are often comparable) of *lycées* and universities that are seen as being a place and tool of labour (and being intended for it) whose production flow (lectures, examinations) is to be interrupted.⁷¹

The radical impetus of the student movement imposed a discipline on the trade union leaders, limiting their room for manoeuvre and preventing them from negotiating a deal with the government that might have saved the CPE. Nothing like this has, alas, happened in Britain. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the trend described by Kouvelakis towards the large-scale involvement of students in precarious labour is very much at work here. And the French example is an important one for students and lecturers in Britain. Elsewhere in Europe it helped to stimulate student occupations in Greece in May and June 2006 that, with union support, forced the right wing government to postpone its plans to privatise the universities.

What has happened in Britain is the development of more militant trade unionism among academics, which led to the merger of the AUT and Natfhe to form UCU. The first test came in spring 2006, when the about to be merged unions mounted a joint boycott of assessment in support of their demand that the university employers fulfil their and the government's promise to use the extra income from tuition fees to begin to reverse the relative decline in academic pay.

The boycott received strong support from lecturers, despite the bullying of university managements, many of which threatened to cut the pay of those taking part in industrial action, and in some cases actually did so. Because academics are service workers, whose work directly benefits the recipients of their service, industrial action is always difficult. The most effective forms of action, by preventing teaching and marking, directly hit students by threatening to deny them education or even their degrees. This isn't an argument against lecturers taking industrial action. They should mount action that hits quickly – all-out strikes or assessment boycotts – so as to put the maximum pressure on the employers to concede an acceptable settlement with the minimum of damage to students.

The student response to the boycott was mixed. The NUS leadership was supportive, but came under pressure from a few student unions that campaigned against the boycott. This was a reflection of two problems. The first is the failure of the NUS leadership to lead effective mass campaigns in defence of students' interests, for example, over the issue of top-up fees. Without any clear evidence of the effectiveness of collective action, it was inevitable some students would be attracted by the idea of themselves as individual consumers seeking to enforce their rights against the academic unions.

Secondly, there is the other side of the social transformation highlighted by Kouvelakis. Students are a socially heterogeneous group. While most will end up in some more or less skilled white-collar job, some come from privileged backgrounds that guarantee them an affluent future. Others from poorer homes still hanker after the very well paid jobs that a small elite can attain, notably in the City. Students hoping to inherit a place in or climb to the upper regions of the class structure are unlikely to look kindly on collective action aimed at remedying the inequalities from which they seek to benefit.

The 2006 assessment boycott came down to a game of chicken: who would blink first – the unions or the employers. Unfortunately it was the leaders of what was about to become UCU who blinked. Breaking promises to their members not to call off the action until a ballot had taken place, they suspended the boycott on the basis of an offer little different from one they had rejected a few days earlier.

Union officials justified this cave-in on the grounds that the boycott was beginning to crumble (though they offered no real evidence to support this) and that, if the action had continued, many university managements would have withdrawn from national pay bargaining. Local bargaining is undoubtedly a real threat, but the only thing that will block it is the assertion of union power, not displays of weakness.

For all that, the strength of the boycott showed the depth of many academics' loyalty to their unions. This was perhaps most striking in some of the old universities where young contract staff helped to breathe new life into local AUT associations, transforming them into real trade union branches. The boycott thus offered a glimpse of the potential of UCU at the same time as it pointed to the need for the left to organise effectively within the merged union to hold the leadership to account.

The gap between the generally progressive policies of both Natfhe and the AUT and the behaviour of their officials over the boycott is nothing new or unique to university lecturers' unions. Full-time trade union officials tend to form a distinct social group defined by their role in mediating between labour and capital. They seek to negotiate better terms for the exploitation of workers rather than to lead struggles aimed at ending that exploitation. This is why, important though it is to elect the best possible union leaders, rank and file trade unionists should never rely on them, but should organise for themselves.

The new UCU Left held its first conference in June 2006. It will have to strive to build strong rank and file organisation that can take action, if necessarily independently of the full-time officials. Wider political horizons will be needed as well. As we have seen, what has dragged down so many workers in universities – and in other workplaces as well – is the belief that there is no alternative

to neoliberal capitalism. The most important achievement of the movement for another globalisation is to challenge this belief – to show that there is nothing natural about a world where the market is sovereign. The left in universities will be most effective where it places itself as part of the worldwide resistance to neoliberalism and war.

Much thought and work needs to go into this. The European Social Forum has provided a framework in which education activists from across Europe can meet and exchange ideas. But this seems to be much more developed among schoolteachers and their unions than it is among academics. But, if another world is possible, why not another university as well?

Today universities perform a ragbag of different social functions, including:

- individual self-development;
- the inculcation of complex, socially useful skills;
- the pursuit of “pure” research – that is the search for knowledge for its own sake;
- the conduct of commercial and military research;
- helping to reproduce a cohesive dominant class; and even
- critical reflection on society.

The current restructuring of universities aims to subordinate them very directly to the needs of neoliberal capitalism. No wonder then that Bill Rammell, the Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, should dismiss the drop in applications for subjects such as philosophy, history, classics and fine art in the 2005 admissions season as “no bad thing”: “students are choosing subjects they think are vocationally beneficial”, he explained.⁷²

But there is no particular reason why the functions listed above should all take place in the same institution – indeed, they haven’t historically. Many of the most influential thinkers of the past couple of centuries – Darwin, Marx and Freud, for example – worked outside universities. Albert Einstein ended up in the academic splendour of the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton, but he wrote the articles that revolutionised physics as a clerk at the Geneva Patents Office. It is only since the Second World War that universities have become the main place where critical theories of society are developed, and many think that the effect has been to encourage the production of abstruse theoretical discourses designed for a readership of academics.⁷³

We should certainly defend what is valuable in existing universities against the threat to destroy it represented by their neoliberal transformation. For example, given the pervasive influence of dumbed down corporate media, it is

important that universities continue to provide an intellectual space where critical thinking takes place. But one subject of critical debate should concern the role of universities in a genuinely democratic society. Worthwhile activities such as seeking self-development, acquiring new skills, and pursuing research need not be carried out in the same institution. Nor do they have to be confined to a specific period in one’s life, usually early adulthood – this is the element of truth in official chatter about “Lifetime Learning”.

And there is certainly no need for universities to be run on the hierarchical basis that they are today, with managers and senior academics at the top. The demands for the democratisation of universities – for students and all university workers to participate in decision making – raised by the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s have lost none of their relevance.

But any real attempt to open universities out and democratise them would run slap against the drive by the government, supported by big business, to harness higher education to the priorities of competition and profit. These priorities could not, for example, tolerate the large-scale redistribution of resources from rich to poor, funded through progressive taxation, that would be needed genuinely to equalise access to education from the earliest years onwards.

What neoliberalism has done has been to isolate and enforce a very pure form of the logic of capitalism itself. This, as we have seen in the case of universities, is a logic of competition and profit. Challenging this logic means pursuing a different kind of world, governed by different priorities – those, for example, of social justice, environmental sustainability and genuine democracy.⁷⁴ Preserving and developing what is valuable in existing universities can’t be separated from the broader struggle against capitalism itself.

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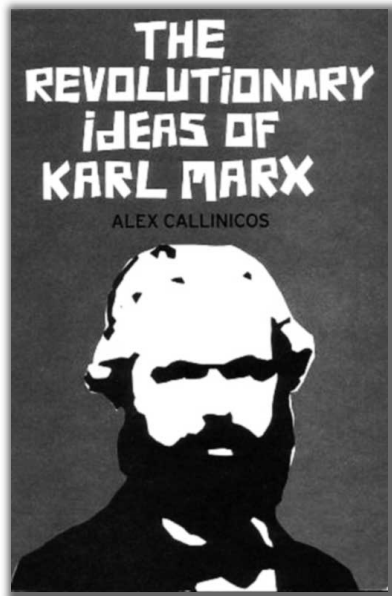
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